

‘Making Sense of the Psalms No.10’

Wednesday 4th November 2009

‘The Extent of God’s Forgiveness’

Psalm 103:1-22

Introduction

This is the third of three Psalms we are looking at on the subject of forgiveness.

Psalm 32 – The Joy of God’s Forgiveness

Psalm 51 – A Prayer for God’s Forgiveness

Psalm 103 – The Extent of God’s Forgiveness

Like the other two we have already looked at, some commentators believe that this Psalm 103 again is connected to David’s sin with Bathsheba and Uriah:

Psalm 51 – The prayer he prayed for God’s forgiveness

when he was confronted by Nathan the prophet.

Psalm 32 – The lessons he learned about God’s forgiveness

that he wanted to pass on to us – Don’t try to cover up your sin yourself, confess it to God and let him cover it properly.

Psalm 103 – The assurance that he came to that God really had forgiven him.

Now that he is sure that God has forgiven him, he just wants ‘all that is in him’ to Praise the Lord! So Psalm 103 is a Psalm of praise from beginning to end.

Henry Francis Lyte, who attended Portora Royal School in Enniskillen in the early 1800s, wrote a famous hymn based on this Psalm. It’s ‘*Praise my soul the King of Heaven*’ (SoF 466). But in many hymn books there’s a verse missing! The full text is:

1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee His praise should sing?
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Praise the everlasting King.

3. Father-like, He tends and spares us,
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In his hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes:
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Widely as His mercy flows.

5. Angels, help us to adore Him;
Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before Him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Praise with us the God of grace.

2. Praise Him for his **grace and favour**
To our fathers in distress;
Praise Him still the same for ever,
Slow to chide and swift to bless:
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Glorious in His faithfulness.

4. Frail as summer’s flower we flourish;
Blows the wind, and it is gone;
But while **mortals rise and perish**
God endures unchanging on.
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Praise the high eternal One.

Taken from ‘Christian Hymns’ No.30
By *Henry Francis Lyte*, (1793-1847).

I want to highlight some key phrases in each of those verses, as they give us a good structure through which to look at this Psalm.

(Perhaps you’d like to keep your hymn book open as well as your Bible tonight...)

1. Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. (Psalm 103 vs.1-5)

The Psalm begins with David talking to himself. No, it’s not the first sign of madness! In fact, it could be the first secret to sanity. If you were finding it hard to come to terms with some terrible sin you had committed in the past, the best thing you could do is remind yourself of how God has forgiven you. That would be the first thing that would help you to praise the Lord!

So in v.1 David exhorts his soul to praise the Lord, and then he urges ‘all his inmost being’ to join in praise to the holy name of the Lord.

He says it again in v.2, and gives us the reason why:

*‘Praise the Lord, O my soul, and **forget not all his benefits.**’*

It is because of all the ways in which we have benefited from God that we should praise him. We should periodically stop and count our blessings – name them one by one, and then it really would surprise us what the Lord has done! What benefits? Well with poetic licence Henry Francis Lyte has changed the word order here, but sticking with the Psalm we have in vs.3-5:

Forgiveness – ‘*who **forgives** all your sins.*’ (forgiven)

Healing – ‘*who **heals** all your diseases.*’ (healed)

Redemption – ‘*who **redeems** your life from the pit*’ (ransomed)

Crowned – ‘*and **crowns** you with love and compassion.*’ (restored)

Satisfaction! – ‘*who **satisfies** your desires with good things*

*so that your youth is **renewed** like the eagle’s.*’

That is what we have to praise the Lord for! All of these blessings are ours despite all our sins of the past. All of these blessings were David’s, despite all that he had done!

It is however important to point out that although David was **instantly forgiven** by God, the child that was born to David and Bathsheba from their encounter was **not healed instantly**, even though David prayed for it night and day for a week. (See 2 Samuel 12:11-25). We can conclude from this episode that prayers for healing are not always answered instantaneously, but the prayer for forgiveness of sins is. (2 Sam 12:13) (Psalm 32:5).

David still had to suffer the consequences of his sins, particularly within his own home and family for the rest of his life, but he was truly forgiven nevertheless.

He was forgiven, he was healed, he was redeemed, he was crowned, he was satisfied, and most of all he was renewed in his walk with God - All because he sought God’s forgiveness. He would have had none of these blessings if he’d gone on covering up! The message to each one of us today is clear! ‘*Seek the Lord while he may be found.*’

2. Grace and favour to our fathers. (Psalm 103 vs.6-10)

As David reflected on God’s grace (undeserved favour) to himself in recent times, he went on to remember God’s grace and favour to his fathers in the past - particularly in the days of Moses, when God rescued his people from Egypt and brought them out.

*'The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
His deeds to the people of Israel.'* (vs.6-7).

There are many links between this Psalm and Exodus 34 in particular. The most important connection is between Psalm 103:8 and Exodus 34:6. What ways did God make known to Moses in his day? Well here is the answer:

*'The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
Nor will he harbour his anger forever;
He does not treat as our sins deserve
Or repay us according to our iniquities.'*

That's what David says in Psalm 103. Listen now to what God revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6 at the time when Moses was told to chisel out two stone tablets just like the first ones that had been broken when he saw the rebellious sin of the people with the golden calf. God's Covenant and His Laws had been broken, even before the ink was dry on the contract as we would say, and yet God still said this about himself:

*'The LORD, the LORD (Yahweh / Jehovah)
(Who is He?) - the compassionate and gracious God,
(What is He like?) - slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,
(Who to?) - maintaining love to thousands,
and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.
(So He's soft on sin then? No!) - Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished;
he punishes the children and their children
for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.'*

We worship a gracious, generous, forgiving God, but He is also a **just** God – a righteous God. He must punish sin, he cannot just let it go, or sweep it under the carpet. That's why he punished sin in his own Son for us, so that he could be **just** in punishing sin and at the same time the One who **justifies** the sinner (Romans 3:21-26).

3. Well our feeble frame he knows. (Psalm 103 vs.11-14)

Here we come to the very heart of the Psalm – to the extent of God's forgiveness.

Here in vs.11 & 12 we have a foretaste of the Cross:

*'For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him.'*

There is the **vertical beam** on the cross - the extent of the love of God that it took to provide a way to forgive, not only us, but a world of sinners. The distance from heaven to earth – an infinite distance, but it was an infinite love. That's exactly what it took – for the Son of God *'to come from heaven and die to save a child like me.'*

But then look at the **horizontal beam** of the cross in v.12:

'As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.'
It doesn't say from north to south – that's a distance that can be measured pole to pole. It says from east to west – a distance that is infinite – you can keep going to the west and never stop. You can keep going to the east and never stop. That's as far as God has removed our sin – our transgressions – from us. What must that have meant to

King David? That's as far as God had removed his lust, his adultery, his scheming, his murdering, even his covering up of his sin, from him! And when God takes it that far away, you can be sure He's going to forget about it – he's not going to keep bringing it up against us, as we are prone to do to each other. Forgiven and forgotten!

But notice this is not a blanket statement for all men – this is only for *'those who fear him'* - a little phrase repeated again and again in this Psalm. (v.11, v.13 & v.17). Who are those who fear the Lord? They are those who are considered as God's children, those who can call God their heavenly Father (v.13). What is the evidence that someone is a child of God? (v.18) They are *'those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.'* In NT language, they are those who are born again into the family of God! Unless and until someone is born again of God's Holy Spirit their sins have not been removed as far as the east is from the west, they are still under the anger and wrath of God; they have not yet experienced the love of God in Christ.

It's because God knows how we were formed; because he remembers that we are dust that He doesn't expect us to be able to save ourselves. How could we? God has to do it for us, and he does, out of his tremendous love and grace and mercy. But that brings us to the next part of the Psalm which reminds us that our time to respond is short:

4. But while mortals rise and perish, God endures. (Psalm 103 vs.15-18)

God knows how we were formed. He was there when he made us out of the dust of the ground. He knows that our days are like grass, or like the flowers of the field (v.15). We're here today and gone tomorrow. The wind just blows on us and we're gone. And our place remembers us no more. Someone has said, 'We're not long gone before we're forgotten.' And it's true. This world goes on, but we don't. But even this world is coming to an end. The only one who is really eternal is God himself (v.17).

*'But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children –
(who with?) with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.'*

He is the One with whom each one of us has to do eternal business. Are we right with God? That's the most important question, more important than any other question. Are you right with God? Because we don't know what a day will bring forth. We don't know if we have tomorrow or not. Today is the only day we're sure of: *'I tell you, now is **the time of God's favour**, now is the day of salvation.'* (2 Cor.6:2).

5. Dwellers all in time and space. (Psalm 103 vs.19-22)

The final verse of Lyte's hymn ties in with the final section of the Psalm. David is reminding us, as Psalm 2 did, that God has already established his throne in heaven. His Kingdom rules over all. So His is the throne we all must answer to one day. The angels do his bidding and obey his word. The heavenly hosts (the sun, moon and stars) do his will. All his works everywhere in his dominion praise the Lord, so why don't we? They have never fallen. They have never been forgiven. They have never experienced God's grace, but WE have! So why are we so slow to praise the Lord? If we really appreciated the extent of God's forgiveness, we'd never stop praising Him!

